

State of the Schools Address 2006
Dr. Stephen C. Jones
February 6, 2006

Our Everest: Delivering on the promise of world-class education

Good evening ladies and gentlemen...Wasn't that a remarkable video?

Please join me in a round of applause for all our schools and for the Channel 47 staff that assembled our "Year in Review" video.

I don't know about you, but I always enjoy seeing the exciting opportunities that occur in our schools and our district. In my case, it not only tells me how much Norfolk Public Schools accomplished over the last year, but also sets the bar for your expectations of me.

It is appropriate that this State of the Schools address comes at the beginning of the calendar year. As many of you know, the month of January was named for the Greek god Janus... a being with two faces who could look simultaneously into the past and into the future.

While none of us has two heads to perform such a feat, tonight I will ask you to join me in keeping one eye on the past and one eye on the future. I am

here this evening to celebrate where we have been... and, most importantly, to show you what can be... what the future holds for the children of Norfolk... if we unite as a community behind public education.

You might notice that the format for this address is a bit different from years past. We have included student performances this evening... please join me in thanking Keenan Ruff of Norview High School; Cameron Watford, Joshlyn Gravely, Naque Walker, and Quenisha Jenkins of Dreamkeepers Academy; and the Granby High School ROTC cadets for sharing their talents with us tonight.

These performances remind us that it is the students of Norfolk that we serve. They are our future... They are the best... and most worthy... investment we can make.

Before we conclude this evening, you also will hear a performance by one of our staff members... She also happens to be the parent of a Norfolk Public Schools student. Her performance reminds us that making the children of Norfolk successful is a job for all of our stakeholders.

School staff cannot do this alone... We need the support of parents... the support of community members... the support of City leaders, business partners and others to ensure that our students achieve their full potential. Quite simply: Educating the children of Norfolk is a shared responsibility.

We accomplished great things over the past year... One of these achievements was winning the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education. There are so many things I could tell you about this exciting moment, but I prefer to give you the opportunity to experience a few of these winning moments for yourself... Please direct your attention to the video screen.

[BROAD VIDEO CLIP]

Every time I see that video clip, my heart still races... The energy I could feel buzzing in that room as we were announced the winner is the same energy I feel in the halls and classrooms of our schools. It is the same energy, enthusiasm, and commitment that the Broad evaluators and judges sensed.

We faced stiff competition for this prize, but the decision was unanimous... and for good reason... Norfolk Public Schools has demonstrated tangible results over the past five years.

We know that individual schools here and there across the country have found formulas for success, but, as the Chicago Tribune points out, “Even more significant... is when an entire public school district manages to narrow the [achievement] gap steadily over time while improving achievement of all students...”

They conclude by saying, “There are lessons to be learned from Norfolk.”

The New York Times continues, “The public schools in Norfolk, Virginia... have steadily narrowed a wide gap between white and black students in reading and mathematics scores...”

Finally, U.S. News & World Report adds, “Today, Norfolk is one of those relatively few bright spots in the often bleak landscape of urban education, boasting impressive, ongoing gains...”

This progress is truly remarkable... BUT IT IS STILL NOT ENOUGH.

The Commonwealth of Virginia requires full accreditation for all schools by the end of this year... but full accreditation means that nearly one-third of our students can still be failing.

That is not good enough for me nor is it good enough for the children of Norfolk.

We are only a few percentage points from achieving universal Standards of Learning accreditation in our district, but we have declared that is to be our floor... a firm and important foundation. But now we must raise our eyes to the ceiling... and begin dismantling it.

In a companion monograph to his celebrated business book Good to Great, author Jim Collins explains: “No matter how much you have achieved, you will always be good relative to what you can become. Greatness is an inherently dynamic process, not an end point. The moment you think of yourself as great, your slide toward mediocrity will have already begun.”

Ladies and Gentlemen: Winning the Broad Prize is validation of our very hard work. It names us as the top urban school system in the country and I am very proud of this accomplishment.

But we can be so much more... We can be one the best school systems in the world! Indeed, the School Board has charged me to ensure that Norfolk Public Schools becomes a world-class school system by the year 2010.

Early in my tenure here, someone compared this journey to world-class status to climbing a mountain. That analogy really stuck with me. The school system has engaged in hard work over the past five years to scale this mountain and now we are at the base camp.

We can see the summit in the distance... We know where we have to go and we have developed a timetable to get there. But, make no mistake. This last leg of the journey will be just as hard... if not harder.

I'd like to take a few minutes to share a story with you. It's one I first shared with our administrators last summer.

How many of you know who Sir Edmund Hillary is? Let me see a show of hands...

Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and his aide de camp... Tenzig Norgay of Nepal... became famous for being the first people to reach the top of Mount Everest.

Consider this: Mount Everest soars over 29,000 feet into the air...Between 1920 and 1952, seven major expeditions failed to reach the summit...In 1924, a famous mountaineer died in the attempt...In 1952, a team of Swiss mountain climbers was forced to turn back after reaching the south peak of Everest... just 1000 feet from their goal.

But on May 29, 1953, Hillary and Norgay set foot on the highest point on earth... They succeeded where others failed and survived a journey that had taken the lives of other great explorers before them.

Does this sound familiar to anyone? How many school systems across the country talk about being world-class? How many of those actually have

accomplished that goal? How many school systems talk about leaving no child behind? How many actually deliver on that promise?

You know that the path is littered with failures... But, where others have failed, we will succeed. We can... AND WILL... become a world-class school system by the year 2010.

Now, we toss that phrase “world-class” around quite a bit... But the difference between us and other districts is that we actually know what that means. We have identified four targets of world-class status. In a world class school system:

- all students possess the habits of powerful literacy;
- all gaps are eliminated while achievement for all students increases;
- all schools exceed local, state, national and international benchmarks;
and
- all students are prepared to access productive options and opportunities upon graduation.

We know from reading Literacy with an Attitude by Patrick Finn that too many urban students are force-fed domesticating literacy... what we call “functional literacy.”

They are taught only what is necessary to maintain the inequities present in our society... They do not learn to think critically... They do not learn to question... They do not become empowered.

That is not the case in a world-class school system.

That will not be the case in Norfolk Public Schools.

Regardless of the color of skin, we will teach our children to be problem-solvers and leaders of their generation.

Regardless of exceptionality, we will teach our children to respect diversity, to work together, and to succeed.

Regardless of socio-economic status, we will teach our children the skills necessary to cope with a complex and changing future.

We will teach the children of Norfolk these things because, for us, **ALL means ALL**.

We have come a long way in making this a reality. A Kindergarten through second grade reading audit conducted nearly two years ago revealed sporadic implementation of our reading plan. Through intense focus and use of peer walk-throughs we saw more consistent implementation of best practices.

Additionally we now know how many students are reading on grade level allowing us to target intervention strategies where they are needed most. This audit was so effective, that we plan to conduct a similar review of our elementary math instructional program.

And as we flesh out our strategic plan for the next five years, we have identified a key standard that will prepare our students for future success.

We will ensure that each child is reading on grade level every year starting with Grade 1.

We know that effective reading skills are the key to student success regardless of the content area. This is a bold promise... but one that we know will pay tremendous dividends.

Another key initiative for Norfolk in the coming years will be to dramatically expand our pre-kindergarten services. Our data demonstrate clearly that children who participate in our pre-kindergarten program enjoy greater academic success.

When it comes to children who face challenges because of poverty or other circumstances, we know that early childhood education is critical in leveling the playing field.

Currently we serve approximately 1,600 four-year olds with the state covering about 86 percent of that cost. We estimate that another 1,800 children could benefit from attending a pre-kindergarten program if available.

Expansion of these early childhood offerings is a critical tool for reaching our target of powerful literacy... but it comes with a cost... and with its own set of challenges.

We must identify space for new classes... We must hire highly qualified staff... We must find funding... But despite these obstacles, we will implement universal pre-K. Look for expansions to be phased in over the next few years.

Our second identified target is eliminating all gaps while increasing achievement for all students. This means both achievement gaps and discipline gaps must narrow and close completely.

Whether a child lives in poverty or wealth... whether a child is black, brown or white... whether a child is male or female... we are committed to ensuring that each reaches his or her potential.

It's possible to artificially close achievement gaps by "putting the brakes" on the top performers. But our continued pledge to you is that progress for one group of students will not come at the expense of another.

And we are delivering on that promise... Over the last 8 years, we have seen a nearly 40 point gain in Grade 3 science scores, a nearly 63 point gain in Grade 5 and 8 history scores, and a 57 point gain in Algebra I.

During the last five years, the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students decreased for 20 of 23 SOL tests.

Folks, the progress made by Norfolk Public Schools since the implementation of the SOLs is nothing short of remarkable... **But we still face challenges.**

As a district we need to raise SOLS scores in Grade 3 and Grade 8 English... in World Geography... in Earth Science... and in Geometry. And there are still significant achievement gaps to close... including Grade 5 science, Biology, and Geometry.

We also know that if all student groups are to move forward, we must place additional emphasis on our special and gifted education programs.

Our exceptional learners have so much potential and we must be prepared to challenge them appropriately. Some of these efforts already are underway.

We have begun a reorganization of our Special Education Department to better meet the needs of our students and schools. Likewise, we are

evaluating our gifted program to determine the necessary enhancements needed.

We must keep an intense focus on ensuring quality staffing and monitoring our accountability if we are to ensure that we will provide world-class opportunities for our exceptional learners.

We also know that we have work to do in closing the discipline gap... I am pleased to report that 99.5 percent of all our students experienced no incidents of physical violence. We are working actively with the Norfolk Police to ensure that gang activity is not a persistent problem in our schools. We have School Resource Officers and uniformed security personnel in all our secondary schools to assist in maintaining a safe, secure and civil learning environment.

But despite these successes, we recognize some daunting challenges. Our data reveal that African American males are referred for discipline at a rate much higher than any other demographic group.

We must find a way to consistently and compassionately dispense the appropriate discipline.

We know that kids misbehave when they aren't adequately engaged in the learning... And, we know that there are a variety of causes for that lack of engagement. But we have an obligation to find a way to reach these students.

The conundrum is this: When our students are not in the classroom, they are not learning. So, we must do all we can to minimize disruptions and keep our students in the traditional classroom.

But until we can fully engage our students in this way, we must provide quality alternative programs. To that end, I have commissioned a committee to review our alternative education offerings.

I believe this group will present some powerful findings and offer some profound recommendations for change.

Rest assured: **We will not give up on any child.** We will find a way to help each student reach his or her potential.

But I need to be clear: I am not willing to accept placing a child in an alternative program that lacks rigor. Meaningful learning must continue.

And, as we confront these educational, social, and emotional needs, exploration of shared services with community organizations and city agencies will be critical if we are to be successful.

Currently, we are piloting the Community of Caring program with several schools. While I will reserve judgment until the year is complete and we have more concrete data, the initial results look extremely promising.

The core values emphasized by this program... Trust... Responsibility... Respect... Caring... and Family... can make a profound impact when embraced by the school and the community.

If a student can make a meaningful connection with an adult, his or her chances for academic success increase. Our staff members are working to make that possible for all children in our schools.

You can help by volunteering as a mentor. It only takes a small time investment each week to make a lasting difference in the life of a child.

[PAUSE]

Our third target of world-class status is ensuring that all schools exceed local, state, national and international benchmarks. Again, I believe that we are well underway.

Elementary school SOL test pass rates exceeded state benchmarks for eight of nine subjects... Middle school pass rates exceeded state benchmarks for all five subjects... And high school pass rates exceeded state benchmarks for 11 of 12 subjects.

Federal No Child Left Behind legislation requires that by 2012 all students pass core content areas. We have established benchmarks for our schools and the district to ensure that all of our students are proficient by 2010... two years earlier than the federal deadline.

We continue to work diligently to improve our competitiveness in the area of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment classes. We have increased

course offerings and hired additional staff to ensure that at least 15 different AP opportunities are available at each high school.

We also created a “Scholars Specialist” position to work closely with the schools to ensure adequate training for teachers and to share advanced instructional practices.

We know we have much more to do in terms of increasing minority student enrollment and increasing the number of students overall scoring a three or better on the AP exams, but our efforts are paying big dividends.

Advanced Placement enrollment and test taking rose significantly this past year. Not only did this translate into increased academic rigor for our students, it also translates into savings for parents... big savings.

Tonight, it is my pleasure to present a ceremonial check to the parents of Norfolk Public Schools students. This check represents the tuition savings earned by students scoring a three or better on an AP exam or students successfully completing a dual enrollment course.

All told, they earned approximately 1,800 hours of college credit at an estimated value of \$335,031. What a tremendous payoff on our investment in public education... Let's hear it for our successful staff and students!

[POINT TO CHECK]

Our fourth and final target of world-class status is ensuring that all students are prepared to access productive options and opportunities upon graduation. No longer can schools afford to prepare students for either a college track or a career track.

We believe that graduates should be prepared to enter post-secondary education AND be able to enter the world of work. Indeed, the demands of the modern job market require that graduates be prepared for both.

Unfortunately, admission to a higher education institution requires more than just graduating...

Colleges review transcripts for rigorous subjects such as advanced math and science.

For our students to successfully complete these requirements, they must succeed in “gatekeeper” courses such as Algebra I. But these types of courses aren’t necessary just for the college-bound.

More and more the skills needed for success in academia have begun to overlap with the skills needed for success in the world of work. The same skills acquired in Algebra can lead to successful careers in ship-building, computer technology, and other competitive professions.

As a result, we are taking steps to ensure that all students complete Algebra I by the end of eighth grade. This includes extra support for students who need it and an intense focus on best practices in math instruction.

Mastery of the foundational skills and reasoning abilities necessary for Algebra opens the door for students to more rigorous courses and is an indicator of potential success for a host of AP courses.

As we move closer to this goal of having all students complete Algebra I by the end of eighth grade, we also move closer to the possibility of having

every student complete at least one AP or one similar-level industry certification course prior to graduation.

Currently, 85 percent of our students plan to either attend a 4- or 2-year college or to enroll in an apprenticeship, career, or technical school.

Our goal is to increase that level to 100 percent.

We already have strong career programs in place... For example, our students can leave high school with industry certifications in Oracle and Sysco... Others opt for certification as pharmacy technicians.

Eighty one graduates earned lucrative certifications last year. But we must take a long, critical look at our career and technical course offerings to ensure that they provide adequate rigor and meet the needs of the business community.

We also must do all that we can to connect our students with the resources they need to take advantage of post-secondary education or career training.

Graduates of the Class of 2005 were offered nearly 11 million dollars in scholarships... an amount that has more than doubled since 1996.

Best of all, we've taken a huge step in exceeding that amount this year. As a result of our Broad Prize win, fifty \$10,000 scholarships... half a million dollars... will be available to graduating seniors.

Despite all the good news, Norfolk Public Schools faces another fiscal hurdle. As an urban school system... as one of the oldest cities in the Commonwealth... we face unique challenges when it comes to our facilities.

The average age of our buildings is 40 years... We cannot aspire to be world class with leaky roofs... We cannot aspire to be world class when we can't plug in additional computers for fear of knocking out power to an entire building.

We have focused our efforts and our resources on building a model instructional program... and rightfully so. But we cannot claim to believe in equity and allow some of our children to be educated in substandard facilities.

We must aggressively lobby the state legislature for increased assistance with our capital needs and examine the potential for public-private partnerships.

I would like to personally thank our City officials... They have been a supportive partner of public education and I know that they will continue to assist us.

Our Mayor, our City Council and our City Manager understand that our children are a worthy investment and that quality schools are a key to successful economic development.

We meet tonight in a state-of-the-art facility.

In a few months, we will begin construction of a new Coleman Place Elementary School... and we will begin construction of a new Crossroads Elementary School about a year after that.

These are exciting projects for us, but our needs are great. The fact remains that, if we added a building to our capital improvement list today and if you had a child entering kindergarten in the fall, your child would not be able to attend that new school.

In fact, it is highly unlikely that the new facility would be complete until your grandchildren were ready to attend! At our current rate of replacement, it would take roughly 30 years to service, renovate, or replace all our buildings in need.

There are no easy answers to our facilities problems, but we must begin a community dialogue about potential solutions now.

[BIG PAUSE]

I would be remiss if I did not recognize the contributions of an exceptional leader here with us tonight. I would like for Dr. Denise Schnitzer to stand and I ask you to join me in a round of applause to recognize her contributions to our success as interim Superintendent of Schools last year.

I need to recognize a few others as well. I'd like to ask Dee Edwards, Sue Bailey Scott, Cynthia Watson, Sharon Byrdsong and Dr. Anna Dodson to stand. Dee was recently selected as Norfolk's Office Professional of the Year... She represents the tireless, experienced support provided by our clerical staff every day.

Sue teaches at Ruffner Academy and is our current Teacher of the Year. She represents the best talent... the best instructional practices... we have to offer our students.

Cynthia is the principal at Booker T. Washington High School and was selected by the Association of Educational Office Professionals as the Administrator of the Year.

Sharon is the principal at Azalea Gardens Middle School and was recently named the National Middle School Principal of the Year. Both Cynthia and Sharon are models of instructional leadership.

And Anna Dodson, former School Board member and Vice Chair, was recognized this fall with the Council of the Great City Schools' top honor...

the Richard R. Green Award which recognizes outstanding contributions to urban public education.

Please join me in one more round of applause for these very special ladies...

When it comes to recognition, I have to say something about our outstanding staff. All our employees have played an important role in improving student achievement in Norfolk. I wish that I could personally congratulate each one. They certainly deserve it.

I also would like to commend our employee organizations... the elementary and secondary schools principals associations... the Association of Educational Office Professionals, the Education Association of Norfolk, and the Norfolk Federation of Teachers.

Their support of our goals has been a tremendous benefit... Please join me in thanking them for being vital partners in our journey to world-class status.

I also must take a moment to recognize our higher education partners...

George Washington University, Norfolk State University, Old Dominion

University, and Tidewater Community College. Without their assistance, we could not prepare future teachers and principals for the challenges that lie ahead. These partners understand the needs of urban educators and students and are helping us to meet those needs. Please join me in a round of applause...

Obviously, I also would like to thank our School Board for their unwavering support of our journey. Their leadership and willingness to put the needs of students first has set the stage for our success. Please join me in recognizing these outstanding leaders.

Now, there is one more group that I need to recognize... and that is you... the parents, the community members, the business leaders. Join me in another round of applause for your assistance!

We have accomplished much over the last five years. But if we are to become a world-class school system by the year 2010, we need you.

I shared the story about climbing Mount Everest for a reason... You will recall that I mentioned not only Edmund Hillary, but also Tenzig Norgay.

Hillary could not have climbed that mountain alone. Without Norgay's support... without his guidance... Hillary could have been just another mountain climber who tried and failed.

In the same respect, we need you with us on this journey to world-class status.

During my tenure, you will see a dramatic expansion of our community engagement efforts... We will work diligently to improve our customer service and strive to make our schools more welcoming places.

These things will happen because I believe that educating our children is a shared responsibility.

Becoming a world-class school system will require the effort of all our stakeholder groups.

We need you to lobby our state legislators to preserve and enhance the money allocated to public education...

We need you to tell your City Council members that education is a top priority...

We need you to be involved in our public schools whether that is by visiting our schools regularly, attending special functions, or volunteering.

Most importantly, we need you to become ambassadors for Norfolk Public Schools.

I have shared some of the national news about Norfolk... Unfortunately, there are still too many here in our city who hold outdated opinions of our public schools.

Be an advocate for us... challenge those false assumptions when you hear them... Provide the facts about our progress. It will make all the difference in the world.

After all, successful public schools are vital to the health of our city. Without quality public schools, businesses will lack the skilled workforce they need

to compete. Without quality public schools, we lack citizens ready to assume leadership roles in our communities. Without quality public schools, our children cannot succeed.

Ladies and gentlemen: becoming a world-class school system by 2010 seems a daunting task, but we can reach our goal.

Even things that seem impossible can be accomplished... After all, no one climbed Mount Everest until Hillary and Norgay.

It is simply a matter of commitment and discipline.

Winston Churchill once said, “The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you will see.” As a former social studies teacher, that sentiment really appeals to me.

I want to call your attention to another special group of people who have joined us tonight.

You know, nearly fifty years ago, another difficult task faced our district and our city. Integrating our schools seemed impossible. But 17 courageous students accepted the challenge...

Supported by their families, their neighbors, and their churches, they rose to the occasion and bested oppression and bigotry.

I would ask the members of the Norfolk 17 who are with us tonight to stand. We have with us this evening Andrew Heidelberg, Patricia Turner, and Patricia White. Please join me in honoring them...

Can you imagine the circumstances they faced? Can you see yourself succeeding in that position?

The good news is that our charge is much less difficult... albeit still daunting.

Because of the Norfolk 17, minority students sit expectantly in our classrooms. If we are to truly honor that legacy, we can do no less than provide a world-class education to each child who enters our halls.

Churchill's words ring true. If we can see our past and where we have come from, we can chart a course toward the future and predict what will come.

We can look back five short years ago to a time when conventional wisdom said that poor kids... that children of color... could not be successful. Today we know that is untrue. We have seen the proof with our own eyes. It is especially appropriate that we acknowledge this as we celebrate Black History Month in February.

I asked you earlier to join me in keeping one eye on the past and one eye on the future. Tonight you have seen our past... the Norfolk 17... the remarkable results our school system has produced despite the odds. Tonight, you have heard the challenges we face in the present.

But I invite you to join me in keeping one eye firmly focused on the future. We can see 2010. We can see all our students succeeding. We can make this vision a reality.

As Jim Collins explains, “Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice and discipline.”

Ladies and gentlemen: We can see our future clearly... With your help, we can conquer our Everest and we can deliver on our promise of world-class education by the year 2010.

Thank you for your attention this evening. I look forward to working with you throughout the remainder of the year.